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Conceptualizing Sub-national Regional Cooperation. Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia case study

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Abstract: Regional cooperation is a context-dependent process that is better understood using a geographical approach; this is, accounting for the region as part of the explanation for and not only as the container in which cooperative agreements operate. The case of the Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia, a bottom-up regional cooperation process that resulted in a regional trademark, illustrates what roles are played by a diversity of local actors and how local socio-economic conditions influence cooperation agreements. The case highlights the inadequacy of inflexible jurisdictional boundaries and the limitations of pre-existing categories (such as inter-municipal cooperation or metropolitan areas). The empirical evidence includes the analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: Colombian coffee, local development, local governments, regional cooperation, rural development, UNESCO Heritage List

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question of how sub-national regional cooperation is locally constructed, acknowledging it as a context embedded process adapted to the local needs and resources available. Regional cooperation is often defined as a strategy used by local political actors, typically municipal governments, to enhance local capacities, to accomplish public tasks, or to address common problems (Hulst *et al.*, 2009). It is not a novel concept, but while urbanisation rises and regions and cities claim a more active role in their economic development (Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose, 2011), cooperation strategies gain more supporters.

Regional cooperation is a phenomenon covered by a diversity of disciplines and geographies. Public administration, economic geography, and urban and planning studies offer a variety of definitions, and emphasise on diverse aspects of the phenomenon, accordingly to their epistemological foundations and empirical evidence. Therefore, categories that include local governments and, by definition, exclude private actors, or conceptualisations that prioritise institutionalised arrangements, are all found in the extensive literature. Themes of economies of scale, transaction costs, effectiveness and efficiency, uneven development and challenges to capitalist economies, or institutional accommodations of the states and the market operating within neoliberal premises, are recurrent themes in regional cooperation literature. This multiplicity suggests that regional cooperation is essentially a social and geographical process of multi-scalar dimension, profoundly linked to local and regional development (Morales, 2018).

To explore the establishment and evolution of regional cooperation processes, this paper uses the case study of the Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia (CCLC). This cooperation process resulted in the inclusion of part of the Coffee Region (see figure 1) in the UNESCO heritage list, under the label of cultural landscape. CCLC does not fit in any pre-established

category of regional cooperation contained in the national legislation, yet it gathers local and national actors, from both the public and private sectors. It is an uncommon case that illustrates how the local context, institutions, and uneven development shape, incentive and constrain regional cooperation.

Figure 1. The Coffee Region in Colombia

Source: Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi.

<https://geoportal.igac.gov.co/sites/geoportal.igac.gov.co/files/geoportal/politicoseg.pdf>

Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia (CCLC) is an area of 141.120 hectare declared world heritage site by UNESCO, as the result of more than a decade of joint work of local academics, private actors, the national and local governments. CCLC is recognised as a productive landscape where economic, natural and cultural features coexist creating unique cultural features (UNESCO, no date). 47 municipalities and 411 small villages are part of the

principal area, plus 4 municipalities and 447 small villages in the buffer area. These municipalities and villages are located in the departments¹ of Caldas, Quindío, Risaralda and the northern part of Valle del Cauca, all of them along the Central Andes Mountain Range. CCLC is a formal recognition of the close relationship between the territory and its most traditional economic activity (coffee production), and the culture and traditions derived from it (Paisaje Cultural Cafetero, 2010).

This paper is divided in 5 sections. Section 2 offers an overview of the methodology applied and the empirical data that supports this document. Section 3 explains the theoretical approaches that explain regional cooperation, from economic geography and public administration research. This section highlights the main areas of contribution of both sets of literature. Section 4 explores the conceptualization of regional cooperation and the actors that play a key role in its development. Section 5 contains the final remarks.

2. Case Study

Regional cooperation has generalizable features already acknowledged in relevant literature: it is an arrangement made by local governments, usually located with spatial proximity, it may include private partners and it is usually established to solve a common problem (see Hulst et al., 2009; Hophmayer-Tokich 2008). These characteristics serve to identify and regulate regional cooperation strategies, but often overlook the influence of the context in the processes, which can result on tight regulations that do not reflect the local needs. Therefore, regional cooperation's research can benefit from empirical evidence that unpacks the contextual conditions and the real-world context where it is practiced. To do so, a case study method is most suitable (Morales, 2018).

¹ Administrative and jurisdictional territorial division. Colombia is divided in 32 departments.

This research utilised both primary and secondary data. Secondary data of data was obtained from official sources and governments' databases, it comprises reports made by international organisations such as United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC – CEPAL), legislation on territorial organisation, land use, territorial competences and finances, and public policy documents on local government plans, development goals, and information directly related to CCLC (see appendix 1). Primary data came from nineteen semi-structured interviews, conducted during May, June and July of 2015 in the Coffee Region (see table 1).

Table 1. List of interviewees

Categories	Roles
Local public level	Int. 1. CAR Planning office, Quindío
	Int. 2. Planning office, Risaralda
	Int. 3. Planning office, Caldas
	Int. 4. Planning office, Armenia
	Int.5. Mayor
	Int. 6. Salamina tourism office
	Int. 7. Politician
Civil sector	Int. 8. Coffee growers leader
	Int. 9. Local leader
	Int. 10 Artisan association
Cooperation strategies	Int. 11. CCLC Tourism project
	Int. 12. CCLC Academic and board member

	Int. 13. CCLC Academic and board member
	Int. 14. Mayor
Private sector	Int. 15. Coffee grower
	Int. 16. Coffee grower
	Int. 17. Chamber of commerce
	Int. 18. Academic
National public level	Int. 19 Congressman

The interviews were conducted in situ, most of them in the interviewee place of work, some others following the walking interview format, mainly those that took place in coffee farms. The aim was to understand the context in which regional cooperation was created, evolved and practiced. The content and questionnaire was adapted to each type of interviewee (actors of the regional cooperation agreement, local government's representatives, representatives of economic activities representatives, and experts). In general, the questions were directed to understand the person's role on CCLC, their assessment of the results, problems faced and solutions reached. The interviews were particularly important to obtain a critical perspective on the case and information that was not publicly available, such as decision-making processes, conflicts that have emerged during the process, and the practicalities of the implementation and the establishment of CCLC.

3. Multidisciplinary approach to processes of regional cooperation.

To answer the question on how regional cooperation is locally constructed, this article uses a multidisciplinary approach to understand how local actors conceptualise and reconfigure

regional cooperation, who is involved, what roles are performed and what factors and scales influence the most the creation of non-prescriptive regional cooperation agreements. Public administration contributions are crucial to understand regional cooperation rationales and forms, according to regulatory and public policy frameworks. However, these explanations say little about external factors and the scales able to influence regional cooperation, or the process that leads local actors to create one or another type of agreement. Therefore, a geographical approach that accounts for the socio economic context and multi/scalar institutions is needed to unpack the process with which regional cooperation is created.

The debate around regional cooperation is more focused on the forms it should take, rather than in its efficiency, which is generally recognised (Lin J.-J. and Liu Y.-H., 2012). Indeed, regional cooperation has a multiplicity of definitions according to the discipline that explains it. However, some general aspects are common amongst that multiplicity. Regional cooperation reflects local development needs, adapts to the local context, and coordinate policies, institutions, and actors from different levels. The most common forms of regional cooperation are agreements between municipalities (inter-local or inter-municipal cooperation), public-private partnerships or economic development alliances. These conceptualizations are studied by the fields of public administration, legal studies, urban planning and economic geography, and are frequently associated with economic growth, regional competitiveness, or efficiency to meet local governments' responsibilities (Spicer, 2015; Cravacoure, 2011; Rodríguez-Oreggia and Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006; Quintero-Lopez, 2006; Feiock, 2007). Each discipline focus on a particular aspect of regional cooperation. The following lines provide an overview of the main theoretical approaches that inform the analysis of CCLC as a regional cooperation process.

3.1. Regional cooperation in public administration research

Public administration research has been mostly preoccupied with defining and classifying the forms of regional cooperation in both the Global North and South (see Spicer, 2015; Cravacoure, 2011; Rodríguez-Oreggia and Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006; Quintero-Lopez, 2006; Feiock, 2007). Broadly, cooperation is defined as ‘all [the] arrangements where local governments cooperate with each other, with other public authorities or with private institutions’ (Hulst *et al.*, 2009:265). This type of regional cooperation (from now on referred as inter-municipal cooperation) is normally implemented by localities with spatial proximity and at least one common problem (Hophmayer-Tokich 2008). Inter-municipal cooperation is mostly used to deliver public services or specific functions (Citroni *et al.*, 2013:210) rather than establish common local and regional development agendas (Hulst and Van Montfort 2007, Hophmayer-Tokich, 2008), and always include local governments, hence, it is formalised via voluntary and written agreements (Hophmayer-Tokich, 2008). Inter-municipal cooperation greatly depends on decentralisation policies and local autonomy (Hulst *et al* 2009), and its classified according to the objectives, the level of government from where it originates, its formal organisation, and its establishment –or not- as a new administrative unit (see table 2).

Based on the rational choice framework second-generation research, known as the Institutional Collective Action framework (see Feiock, 2007), it is argued that collective benefits and reduced transaction costs explain why jurisdictions decide to cooperate with each other. Therefore, cooperative agreements are only viable when the expected benefits exceed the costs of negotiating, coordinating, monitoring and enforcing the agreement (Feiock, 2007). Once transaction costs are assessed, five core variables influence the further establishment or not of cooperative agreements (Spicer, 2015): First, interaction and networks that create trust and reciprocity. Second, a group composition that allows coordination,

management and distribution of benefits and commitments, the larger the group, the less likely to cooperate or to maintain the agreement. Third, geographic density, cooperation occurs more easily amongst jurisdictions that are closer to each other. Fourth, power symmetry, as differential powers can lead to coercive rather than voluntary relationships of cooperation. Fifth, political leadership, it is the local governments' role to initiate and formalise the agreements, as these normally are bottom-up, voluntary and negotiated initiatives.

Table 2. Most common classifications of inter-municipal cooperation

Criteria	Types
Objectives	Service delivery or policy coordination Single or multipurpose
Actors involved	Horizontal (local governments only) Vertical (other levels of government or private actors)
Level of the initiative and local governments' autonomy	Voluntary or bottom-up Induced or top-down
Formalisation	Contracts Standing organizations
New administrative units	Mergers Metropolitan areas Polycentric regions

Source: Author, based on Citroni, Lippi, & Profeti, 2013; Egermann, 2009 and Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007.

Public administration research provides a comprehensive framework to analyse the different forms of regional cooperation. However, its geographical aspect is overlooked, as it is assumed that regional cooperation is the result of individual behaviour shaped by rational choice and not by the context where it is practiced. A case as CCLC shows that the local context has also a role to play, as it provides the rationales and influence the terms of regional

cooperation, while actors and institutions from multiple scales provide incentives and frameworks for the agreements.

3.2. A geographical understanding of regional cooperation

Economic geography and regional studies does not address regional cooperation directly, at least not exactly in the terms of this research. It focuses on agglomerative economies, regional innovation systems, and local economic processes and its multi-scalar interactions. However, its contributions are crucial to understand how institutions shape development processes at a local scale, which include regional cooperation. Institutions are ‘written and unwritten codes and norms that provide necessary stability and predictability to enable basic economic functions – production, distribution, [and] consumption’ (Gertler, 2010). These rules have diverse origins and hierarchies, ranging from laws all the way to mores and manners. Institutions are often classified as formal or hard, and informal or soft institutions. Formal or hard institutions are written rules contained in constitutions, laws, contracts, and regulations, and informal or soft institutions are non-written norms, manners, traditions and social conventions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). For local economic development, formal institutions include systems of governance and the relationship between the local and national governments, while informal institutions include unwritten rules that govern cooperative work between public and private sectors (Pike et. al, 2015).

The most relevant formal institution identified in the case study are those related to decentralisation policies. Decentralisation is to transfer political decision-making power from the national to the local government. It has different forms, political, fiscal or administrative. Political decentralisation refers to sub-national levels undertaking political and governance functions. Fiscal decentralisation refers to the local governments’ autonomy over tax and public finances expenditure. Administrative decentralisation refers to administrative functions that are undertaken by the sub-national level (Pike et al, 2016). Decentralisation can also take

the form of deconcentration, this is, the dispersion of central government functions and responsibilities to sub-national offices or branches, or delegation, this is, the transfer of policy responsibility to local governments that remain accountable to the central government (Pike et al, 2016). It is argued that decentralisation improves efficiency and responsiveness, especially for public services provision, that a decentralised government can deal readily with social and political tensions and ensure local and cultural autonomy (Bardhan, P., 2002), while facilitating and enhancing accountability and communication between the citizens and their governments (Diaz-Serrano and Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). However, in relation to the impact of decentralisation in economic development, it is argued that decentralisation can worsen political disparities and regional unevenness and undermine economic growth (Rodríguez-pose and Gill, 2003).

In terms of specific forms or categories of regional cooperation, regional studies refer to cross-border cooperation and territorial re-scaling. Research on territorial governance and the emergence of cross-border cooperation strategies and regions builds over European experiences mostly, focused on subnational cooperative agreements between cross border regions (see Perkmann 2003; 2007; Nelles and Durand, 2012). Despite the great differences between the case analysed in this article and the empirical grounds of cross-border cooperation research, the contributions remain relevant as there is specific acknowledgment of international actors' role in regional cooperation. Cross-border cooperation has a long tradition that dates back to 1950's, but of significant influence on the European geography for the last 30 years, partly due to the role of the European Union (Perkmann 2003; 2007).

Although most of the initial initiatives of cross-border cooperation in Europe are bottom-up driven (Anderson and O'Dowd, 1999; Anderson 1997 cited in Perkmann, 2003:166), financial support, incentives and supra-national public policy that provided a regulatory framework for otherwise "loose and poorly equipped communities", facilitated the creation and expansion of

institutionalised forms of cooperation (Perkmann, 2003:167). Emergent forms of cross-border cooperation loosely equipped and dependant on good will, evolved to more sophisticated politico-administrative entities once the regulatory framework was put in place by a supranational organisation.

On the other hand, there is a number of research investigating political re-scaling processes and territorial reconfigurations (see Brenner 2003; Johnson, 2009). It is argued that a shift in spatial development policies are a response to neoliberal economic agendas. Consequently, metropolitan and polycentric metropolitan areas emerge to gain competitiveness in global markets (Brenner, 2003; Egermann, 2009). Public-private partnerships became institutional accommodations of the state and the market, based on agreements to provide public services or build infrastructure (Leitner, 2007). Public-private partnerships are a popular strategy to deliver infrastructure or any other development promise, despite of being strongly criticised for the disproportionate costs these bring to communities (Girón, 2015), and the great power unbalance that could turn public-private partnerships into the Trojan horse of international development (Miraftab, 2004).

To summarise, a multidisciplinary approach to regional cooperation allows understanding it as a context dependent process that is adapted and reconfigured by local actors. Regional cooperation is not only designed to deliver public services, or increase public sector efficiency, it can address local and regional development agendas, and is influenced by both, individual circumstances such as public officials willingness to cooperate, and regional socio economic contexts that create the needs to create cooperative agreements, as it is going to be explained in the following section.

4. Conceptualizing regional cooperation

Empirical evidence shows that CCLC establishment and development was strongly influenced

by two contextual and multiscalar factors, first, a continuing socio economic stagnation and growing inequality and, second, the policies of decentralisation. This section begins by exploring both factors, and proceeds explaining how regional cooperation is re-defined by atypical cases as CCLC, and the roles that most crucial actors have played in the process.

4.1. Rural inequality and socio economic crisis as rationales

Data shows that the rationales to start CCLC were, first, the economic and social inequality, second, the limited scope of individual work to produce social and economic changes.

Regional cooperation becomes an alternative to overcome social and economic problems exacerbated by the local governments' ineffectiveness, in a region that fell behind economic development processes. The Coffee Region has been historically dependent on agricultural production, has significant levels of inequality and, by the time CCLC started, high levels of poverty, especially amongst rural population, and local governments unable to address these issues (interviews).

‘With the open market policies and with the International Coffee Pact rupture in 1989 (...) coffee prices plummeted, harming the region's living conditions, purchasing power, GDP and the investments once made by the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros*, who's financial and infrastructure investment that once replaced the State, stopped. Worthy to say that the *Federación* was almost a parallel state here, covering social investment in rural areas. There was no more investment in roads or anything. The region has gone backwards’. (Int. 17)

The Coffee Region (excluding northern Valle del Cauca) was a single administrative divided in three departments in 1966 (PNUD, 2004). This division occurred during a period known as *la bonanza cafetera* (1970s - mid 1980s), when international prices of coffee reached their highest rates, bringing rapid economic growth and social wellbeing. The region was regarded as a successful example of territorial development in the country due to its good connectivity

and infrastructure, mostly delivered by the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros*² (FNC), as the quote above shows, and it has almost escaped –or rather ignored- the worst consequences of the Colombian internal conflict (Toro-Zuluaga, 2004). High international coffee prices were guaranteed through protective measures contained in the International Coffee Agreement, which allowed producing countries to regulate prices by setting production quotas. However, in July 1989 and after almost 30 years of implementation, the agreement was terminated (see Lopera, 1993). The contraction of international coffee prices brought economic deceleration and stagnation (CEPAL, 1999, PNUD, 2004). During the same period, Colombia began a process of neoliberalisation (known as *Apertura Económica*), this is, to ‘liberalise trade (...), liberalise foreign exchange transactions, eliminate all restrictions to foreign direct investment, reform the labour code (in order to make labour more flexible) and the social security system, to allow private investment in an area traditionally reserved for the state’ (Zapata, 2011:39). These reforms worsened the economic and social conditions in the Coffee Region, to the point that the 1992-2003 period is called ‘the Lost Decade’ (Arango-Gaviria, 2008). In January 1999, a 6.8 earthquake (Richter scale) caused major human, economic and infrastructural losses (CEPAL, 1999). Although the region was already in a phase of economic decline, the relative wellbeing that remained had hidden inequality, unemployment, emigration and the effects of forced displacement. Those circumstances became evident, and worsened, after the natural disaster (CEPAL, 1999). Since early 2000s, the region has attempted to diversify regional economies through tourism and commerce (Valencia-Valencia et al., 2013). This shift was initiated by private initiative, mostly coffee entrepreneurs who found in tourism an alternative to increase their profit using existing infrastructure (CEPAL, 1999).

² FNC was established in 1927 as a private non-profit organisation, from coffee growers’ initiative, organise themselves, to contribute in improving their own wellbeing and to become representatives of the sector at the national and international level (FNC, n.d.). FNC has become a strong organisation, managing and advising coffee diplomacy and policy (Toro-Zuluaga, 2004).

This socio-economic context was determinant for CCLC, as it created the need to find alternative solutions to economic stagnation and the consequent social problems. CCLC started in 1995 as a private and small initiative from a group of local academics, as a response to economic and social crisis in the region (Int. 12). Their aim was to diversify the economic activities of one town (Salamina), by capitalising its cultural features as a tourist destination. Lacking alternatives in the national regulations, as in due need of updating land use regulations and encourage tourism, opting for the UNESCO heritage list was the most viable choice. An initial condition was to submit the proposal with the participation of the national government whom, through the Ministry of Culture, agreed in supporting the project only if it was expanded to the Coffee Region. The rationale behind this condition was the potential benefit that an international recognition could bring to an economically stagnated region, as it could boost regional economy in an area that shares cultural and economic conditions (Int. 13).

CCLC evolution can be divided into two stages: before and after the region was finally included in the world's heritage list in 2011 (see figure 2). The first stage, which is the timeline this article is based upon, included the activities to consolidate the regional project, including the design of an internal governing system and working groups with actors from different institutions and sectors (local governments, the autonomous regional corporations CAR³ and local academics). Between 2004 and 2005, Caldas, Quindío, Risaralda and Valle del Cauca signed a contract with the Ministry of Culture and submitted the application to UNESCO. The outcome of this initial submission was to create management plan as condition for including the region in the cultural landscape category. The plan was completed in 2009. During these years, more actors joined the project⁴ and the participation of the private sector

³ Local organisations from the public sector in charge of the environmental conservation and planning

⁴ FNC, commerce chambers, local politicians and coffee growers representatives.

increased. The second stage starts when the region was officially included in the heritage list in 2011. Since then, the management plan has been implemented, adapted and included into the municipal and departmental development plans. These documents, created by the governors and mayors (respectively), contain the development programs and strategies to be implemented during their administrative period (4 years).

“CCLC management plan aims to create stronger bonds of belonging and ownership in CCLC communities, and to preserve the productive landscape under sustainable principles, making it congruent with the economic activities. The management practices included in this plan must focus on the economic and social wellbeing of all of the inhabitants, and to create a sense of ownership of their cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability” (Paisaje Cultural Cafetero, 2009).

While socio economic crises became the rationales to create CCLC, and provided the agenda in which the process was going to be focused, decentralisation policies shaped the form with which CCLC developed.

Figure 2. CCLC timeline. Author

4.2. Decentralisation and local agency

Decentralisation has influenced regional cooperation by incentivising or constraining local agency, creating formal institutions that allow establishing cooperative alliances and defining the forms of regional cooperation. Although it is not the concern of this article to make an

exhaustive analysis of decentralisation policies and individual regulations in Colombia (for these purposes, see Maldonado, 2001; Ramírez *et al*, 2014; Asela, 2015), some clarifications are needed, as decentralisation has played a crucial role in defining CCLC.

Colombia is a case of mixed decentralisation and delegation of responsibilities and resources (Pening, 2003). After the 1991 National Constitution was enacted, decentralisation policies have aimed to reduce regional unevenness. However, inequality and low territorial institutional and financial capacity remains (Ramírez *et al*, 2014, Maldonado, 2001). In terms of financial capacity, one of the greatest constraints for CCLC as shown by the empirical data, most of local financial resources are conditioned according to the national regulations, as those are transferred from the national government through the General Participatory System⁵, co-financing systems and the General Royalties System⁶. These resources usually come with predefined destinations.

‘[The national government] sends the money, but it is conditioned (...) we do have room of manoeuvre with our own resources, whatever we collect from tobacco and alcohol or vehicle tax (...) but most of the resources are conditioned, normally for education and health’ Int7- Professional on local planning1, Pereira, Col. 2015)

Most of its municipalities are financially dependent on the central government, and have a low and uneven economic and institutional capacity, making them unable to produce a significant amount of their own resources. Therefore, national transfers are their main source of financing, trend that tends to intensify through time (Fretes-Cibils *et al*, 2015). This dependence does not necessarily mean that the local governments lack resources, but refers to

⁵ *Sistema General de Participaciones*. It is the management system for intergovernmental fiscal transfers.

⁶ *Sistema General de Regalías*. It is the management system to distribute oil and mining royalties amongst territorial units. This distribution system

the conditionality of those that are transferred. For CCLC, this means that the local governments do not have agency to invest in it.

Beyond defining local agency, decentralisation policies also refer to regional cooperation strategies specifically. Colombian legislation provide legal tools for regional cooperation in the form of metropolitan areas, inter-municipal cooperation and regional integration, yet these forms are hardly applicable due to their territorial insensitivity. Regional integration shows this issue better. CCLC aims for regional integration in the terms of creating a new standing territorial unit, which could grant it with the legal and financial autonomy needed to deliver its objectives. The National Constitution allows creating administrative regions by joining two or more departments, metropolitan areas and provinces between municipalities and/or indigenous territories within the same department (arts. 306, 319, 321). However, the forms of regional integration remained inapplicable because, as stated in the Constitution, they required further regulation. That regulation came twenty years later with the called Territorial Organisation Organic Law (LOOT), where the list of regional cooperation-integration strategies was complemented with a new figure (municipalities associations).

“After all these years (...) the LOOT did everything to do nothing, the wish that many of us have had for so long, to create regions as legally recognised territories was frustrated (...) because if you look at the legislation carefully, you will find that regions as territorial units cannot be created unless you join entire departments, is nonsense” (Int.12)

As the quote shows, the possibility to create regions that are jurisdictionally recognised is limited by the condition of joining entire departments and not sections of them. As CCLC gathers some municipalities from different departments, which are connected not because of jurisdictional limits but for sharing socio-economic, natural and cultural features, to make it a formally recognised region is not viable. Therefore, according to the interviewees, none of the tools or forms of regional cooperation contained in national legislations were applicable, as none of them fitted the aims, objectives, and geographical composition of CCLC.

4.3. CCLC and the need of flexible categories

Regional cooperation, from the outcomes and for the purpose of this research, is understood as a process where actors of different qualities work collectively and concertedly in pursuing a common goal related to improving local and regional development. Regional cooperation is a process of a voluntary nature, voluntary agreements formalised through contracts between actors and organisations that are otherwise economically and legally independent (Hulst, 2007). The empirical evidence suggests that the types of relationships that emerge from these agreements vary and depend on their nature, purpose, and actors involved. Therefore, vertical relationships based on hierarchical schemes, or horizontal governing systems where the partners have the same level in the agreement's organisation and management, can develop. These relationships are bilateral or multilateral, and aim for a common goal, the solution of a shared problem or the achievement of a strategic advantage that is hardly reached with individual action (Morales, 2018).

CCLC is managed by a Permanent Board of Decisions, comprised of local governors, the Ministry of Culture, FNC, the autonomous regional corporations and SUEJE (see figure 3). The Board of Decisions is a new institutional arrangement that follows a horizontal system where actors from different levels of government and the private sector participate. Interviewees recognised that this governing system lacks inclusiveness and enforcement capabilities, making it dependent on persuasion and incentives, mostly potential economic benefits, to materialise their decisions and projects.

‘CCLC sustainability depends in our own ability to re-design its governing system. We need a new institutional arrangement, one that is more inclusive, decentralised and autonomous, in which local governments and communities can actively participate. The actual design does not include the municipalities (...) even when they are the ones with powers over the region (...) we also need municipal committees in charge of implement the management plan in their areas’ (Int. 13)

Figure 3. Governing system.

CCLC strategies, values, programs and institutional participation are articulated through a multitude of regulations and legal tools. These include municipal and departmental development plans, Colombian National Constitution, laws for territorial protection and use, laws for cultural heritage conservation, *Café de Colombia* denomination of origin, and contractual agreements amongst participant organisations, authorities and private actors. In financial terms, CCLC has received funding from the national government allocated, the Inter-American Development Bank and some regional governments. CCLC is a complex and perhaps overly ambitious project that can only be achieved through multilevel regional cooperation.

In terms of the territorial composition of regional cooperation, the existence of shared socio-economic and cultural conditions becomes more important than geographical proximity. These socio-economic conditions and relational networks can or cannot coincide with jurisdictional borders. CCLC comprises municipalities that share cultural features and economic processes, but are located in four different departments. CCLC reflects a territorial composition that obeys to social, cultural, and economic relationships taking place in

multilevel settings, rather than jurisdictional delimitations. The establishment of regional cooperation can be hardly bounded to predefined categories. CCLC shows that regional cooperation can gather diverse characteristics found in several categories at the same time, without compromising its establishment. CCLC is a mixed arrangement in the sense that both public and private actors participate, and an arrangement of policy coordination with multiple purposes. CCLC is a legal form of regional cooperation not foreseen in the legislation. It needed a different design because being part of the UNESCO heritage list sets responsibilities for the national government; demands great financial investment, innovative governing systems and policy coordination.

CCLC is a hybrid form of regional cooperation in which public and private actors from different levels are involved, and where different types of legal and political tools are used to implement and maintain the process. The need of holding flexible categories for regional cooperation extends to the roles that actors are allowed to take, as it is going to be explained.

Academia and its role of leadership

Although political leadership is considered as a core variable for regional cooperation between local jurisdictions (Feiock, 2007) or cross-border regions (Perkmann, 2003), non-traditional or emerging forms of regional cooperation adapt to the contextual conditions rather than to jurisdictional competences. CCLC is a non-prescriptive form of regional cooperation, and the process has been created, established and lead by private actors and the academic sector. Indeed, CCLC began with a group of local academics from some of the regional universities.

CCLC leaders are characterised by their territorial attachment and their affiliation with a professional career that facilitated networking and debate, but not for holding a position in the public sector. Interviewees who actively participated in the initial stages of CCLC appointed their success (materialised with the inclusion of CCLC in the UNESCO list), to the fact that

leaders belong to the academic and not the local public sector. Interaction facilitated by common networks have being already identified by public administration research in reference to the rationales to cooperate (Feiock, 2007; Gillette, 2005), but not much has been said in terms of territorial attachment, where the aim to overcome crises are a stronger rationale than interaction and networking. Yet, networks and interaction were proven critical. A minimum degree of interaction is essential for regional cooperation (Cook et al., 2005), as it facilitates knowledge exchange, definition of goals, compromises, benefits distribution, and establishing the form and terms of the agreement. In the case studied here, local academics were already connected through the system of universities of the Coffee Region (SUEJE). This association gathers most of the public and private universities, and serves as a pre-existing space of interaction and knowledge exchange.

Local governments and local public sector as facilitators

In CCLC, local governments are partners with, in general, little degree of engagement. Two factors explain the rather passive role of local governments. First, the limited local agency and the temporality of elected officials. Literature usually acknowledges that elected officials have low interest in pursuing projects that transcend their mandate's period, and are reluctant to the subordination and potential loss of political power that is implied with any cooperative agreement (Spicer, 2015), as was indeed confirmed by the interviewees. This could imply that regional cooperation is more likely to occur amongst non-elected officials. However, evidence shows that local governments' low institutional and financial capacity constrains non-elected officials to lead cooperative agreements. Second, the local governments' uneven representation in CCLC governing system. This has led to either a lack of interest and knowledge about the process, especially in smaller and more distant towns, or to a greater dispersion of policies and actions. Armenia (Quindío's capital city), self-named cultural landscape pioneer city, has created its own municipal committee where projects are

discussed and decided separately from CCLC's governing system and within the municipal borders.

CCLC is a complex process with ambitious objectives. Fifty-one municipalities are involved and local governments' participation and support is vital. The protection of the cultural and natural landscape entails a wide variety of actions and projects of considerable financial investment. However, local governments' participation has been varied and, in average, poor. CCLC projects must be approved by the local governments for these to be included in the local development plans, vital to guarantee funding and political support. Projects such as changing land use regulations, investment in infrastructure, creation of incentives to produce specialty coffee, or the promotion of sustainable tourism (Paisaje Cultural Cafetero, 2009) cannot be developed without the local governments' approval and investment. However, while few mayors and governors have shown an active support, rapidly including CCLC in their development plans and providing some -yet scarce- resources, most of them remain expectant of the benefits that CCLC can bring, without engaging in the decision-making process, investment or regional policy design.

Empirical evidence suggests that local government's participation is not essential for regional cooperation to exist, but is vital for its continuity. When regional cooperation aims to influence public policy, local governments are essential as only they can alter public local policies, but even in these cases, the private sector, in this case represented by the regional academia, alongside the national government and international organisations, can create the conditions and incentives to increase local governments' involvement. When regional cooperation aims to deliver a public service, or influence local economic growth through specific actions on certain economic sectors, local government's participation is important as they can provide some conditions to develop local economy. However, their role can be substituted by the national government or international organisations. In the Coffee Region,

CCLC aim to influence public policy, a task that can be better materialised through the local governments. However, their participation varies from passiveness to inefficient and contradictory proactivity, but never of leadership. Despite the assumption that local governments are active partners, or that some cases cannot classify as regional cooperation because they occur within a private scale, here is argued that a binary of public or private is not enough to exclude certain cases of cooperative work from the broader definition of regional cooperation.

National government as enabler

CCLC is a private initiative, but heritage sites must be nominated by the country, making national government's participation mandatory. CCLC was nominated to UNESCO by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thanks to the previous work done with the Ministry of Culture. Due to the characteristics and needs of CCLC, public investment is essential. However, as mentioned, some municipalities' financial capacities are not sufficient, and others simply lack political will. As long as these conditions remain unaltered, or CCLC does not raise funds from elsewhere, its continuity depends on the national government and the private sector. Regional cooperation was encouraged by the national government in the Coffee Region. When economic and social crises remain unsolved, its management migrates from the economic to the political sphere, and regional cooperation emerges as a 'politically mediated institutional project' (Jones, 2011:1204) that aims to solve a set of problems. Evidence shows that actors design regional cooperation strategies and reach the national government for its intervention. The national government participates as long as the project offers a potential solution for economic stagnation, allowing it to reconfigure its regional presence. While the national governments participate or encourage regional cooperation because of its potential

problem solving capacity, regional cooperation processes rely on the national governments to accomplish the role that is expected from an inefficient local level.

International organisations

In a context where local governments have limited autonomy and agency, the participation of external actors becomes crucial for creating and maintaining regional cooperation. Amongst the different fields and approaches where regional cooperation is studied, international actors are recognised as crucial only in the framework of cross-border cooperation and metropolitan governance (Perkmann, 2003; 2007). Although CCLC does not fit within the category of cross-border cooperation, there is one common aspect to highlight. These emergent or non-traditional forms of regional cooperation have found regulatory frameworks and financial aid in international organisations. The existence of the cultural landscape category in UNESCO heritage list, grants the region with an international recognition that commits the national state and serves as a catalyser for the process to take the form it took. Lacking of an appropriate national or local regulatory framework where CCLC objectives fitted, that framework was provided by UNESCO. Other international organisations have played an important role in CCLC. The Multilateral Investment Fund provided financial resources for the consolidation of what is called a regional tourism cluster, where tourist services providers are trained, certified, and promoted (Int. 9). This project, called *Rutas del Paisaje Cultural Cafetero*, has been awarded with international prizes, giving CCLC international recognition amongst the tourist sector.

4.4. The limits of regional cooperation

Regional cooperation cannot encompass every local and regional need, even a process that aims to influence rural and economic development policies as CCLC, has a limited scope and limited capacities. CCLC is not a process of territorial re-scaling either, as these processes

require of sophisticated levels of formal institutionalisation, autonomy and independent agency (Egermann, 2009; Brenner, 2003). CCLC is a broad process concerned for economic, cultural, and environmental issues, yet it cannot ‘offer a solution to all urban and rural problems, we must focus on the landscape’s agro-productive problems, but never pretend to solve all regional needs’ (Int.12).

CCLC aims to influence public policy, hence, pinpointing particular programs and attributing them to CCLC alone proved to be a rather evasive task. The most tangible product CCLC can show as effect of the process is the inclusion of the Coffee Region in the UNESCO heritage list. From there, a variety of discourses, programs and economic effects have developed partly due to the heritage list, partly due to the work of other local actors that are not directly related to CCLC. Not having a list of tangible programs, results or infrastructure to show (at least until the moment when this research was conducted), can result in CCLC losing social legitimacy, but that is speculative. Perhaps the more tangible contributions to local and regional development that CCLC brings are the presence of CCLC as a trademark in regional policies, and local and national media. A regional identity around the CCLC region and a stronger sense of belonging is starting to permeate its inhabitants’ discourse, making of CCLC a regional trademark that needs to be preserved (Int. 17). Several public reports and research are being produced, and academic and technical programs delivered by local universities and institutes are addressing and teaching themes directly related to the cultural landscape (such as specialty coffee production, tourism, and territorial planning (Morales, 2018). Local and national media have actively publicised and debated CCLC, exerting pressure on local authorities to prioritise CCLC over contradictory economic development policies, but this has showed rather varied results, and the best example is the tourist industry. Indeed, CCLC faces opposing interests and agendas, especially regarding the benefits of tourism for the region. While tourism has been actively promoted by local governments and private actors such as

regional commerce chambers, resistance movements and representatives of coffee growers question the supposed benefits tourism claim to bring to rural populations, and expose the advantage that economic elites are taking by using CCLC as a trademark for increasing their profit.

‘(...) who has got the benefits from tourism? Not the towns, or the rural areas, perhaps small coffee producers, but just a little. The big coffee farms, they do see the money from tourism. So we are going backwards, all again through the same debates, who can take advantage of this new situation, it’s about inequality and poverty (...) something has to be done because how is it possible that we are the first or second best tourist region yet the first or second in unemployment?’ (Int. 9)

CCLC has become another regional actor that sits between conflicting agendas. First, demands for stricter land use regulations, environmental conservation and cultural protection. Second, tourist entrepreneurs and artisan coffee producers that have found alternative sources of income. Third, neoliberalism carriers who, making use of CCLC trademark, are developing a mass tourism and luxury construction industry.

5. *Conclusions*

Current debates about the conceptualisation of regional cooperation can be found in public administration research. Although comprehensive in terms of forms and rationales, these debates are often restricted to certain types of cooperative agreements and participating actors (Rodríguez-Oreggia and Tuirán-Gutiérrez, 2006; Feiock, 2004; Hulst et al, 2007), and tend to explain the origins of regional cooperation in collective action frameworks, leaving a gap regarding the changing roles of the local and national governments and the influence of the local socio-economic context (Feiock 2007a; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003). Regional cooperation is a complex social phenomenon that cannot be fully explained by law, rational choice and economics perspective alone. Its existence goes beyond legislation, spillovers

effects, surplus and transaction costs. This complexity can be better understood using a geographical perspective that accounts for the local context, and complemented with different disciplines. The empirical evidence suggests that the local context and socio-economic trajectories are determinant to shape regional cooperation. This geographical approach, however, says little about the actors that participate in regional cooperation processes, area where public administration research is crucial to understand the diversity of definitions and identify the actors playing important roles in cooperation strategies. To acknowledge the variety with which regional cooperation can be materialised, and the different roles that actors can play, may serve as a call for more flexible public policies and regulations that allow regional cooperation to be created and sustained.

Therefore, to understand how regional cooperation is locally constructed, it is needed to approach it as a complex process that changes, adapts and responds to contextual needs and available resources. Empirical evidence showed that social, economic and political conditions prepared the ground for potential agreements established later with the input of actors from multiple scales, and limited by jurisdictional borders and tight legislations. In a context of centralism, low local autonomy and uneven development, a high level of innovation and creativity is needed, as a successful agreement should be designed to adapt to that context and overcome legal and territorial limitations. Hence, CCLC could not fit in any category previously identified, but it is influenced by factors that typically shape common forms of inter-local cooperation. CCLC depends deeply on decentralisation policies, pre-existing networks for exchange and deliberation, geographical proximity and the participation of actors beyond local governments. What otherwise could be a loose collection of agendas, contracts and informal agreements, can be formalised under a regional trademark legitimated by an international organisation. Hence, using the case of CCLC, this article highlights the socio-economic side of regional cooperation (Perkmann, 2003; Nelles and Durand, 2012), the

social and spatial constructions of regions reflected in such processes (Jones and McLeod, 2011), and the relationship between regional cooperation and multilevel institutions (Feiock, 2001; Hulst et al, 2009; Perkmann, 2003a).

Finally, to add atypical forms of regional cooperation coming from middle sized regions from Global South countries helps to open up the conversation to a much needed diversity of geographical spaces, as most of the economic geography and public administration literature is based on the Global North experiences, or Global South experiences that have followed a 'Global North model'.

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Annex 1 - Secondary data – reports and legislation

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